



Orality, historiography and literary imaginations: The interfaces of narratives.

Jyotirmoy Prodhani

Abstract

Orality precedes the written. Stories told orally formed what we call the oral narratives from which, throughout human history, several epochal texts were produced including the wall paintings, the most significant early derivatives of oral narratives like the *Ittalan* paintings of the Saoras of Ganjam in Odisha, which literally means 'to write on the wall'. Walter J Ong while theorising orality divided it into three basic categories- primary, secondary and residual orality. Oral narratives have been the most crucial sources leading to the production of cultural texts for they have not only seminally determined the cultural life of human societies, they have also been significantly influential in the realms of religious and spiritual life worlds of the communities. However, history and orality seem to be apparently incongruous, primarily because when orality is largely seen as a narrative based on the slippery terrain of memory, history, on the other hand, is considered a more solemn discipline, a quasi-scientific discourse, what is called 'modern historiography'. 'Can history be formed from orally transmitted narratives?' However, with the arrival of 'metahistory' of the theorists like Hayden White the boundaries between literature and history have progressively blurred. *Buranjis* of Assam is one such traditions of historiography. Orality has not only been recognised as one of the major sources of historiography, it has also inspired creative literature in a significant way. The proposed paper seeks to examine the dimensions of the inter-linkages across narratives including orality, history and literature with an accent on the Northeast.

Keywords: orality, memory, metahistory, *buranji*, Northeast.

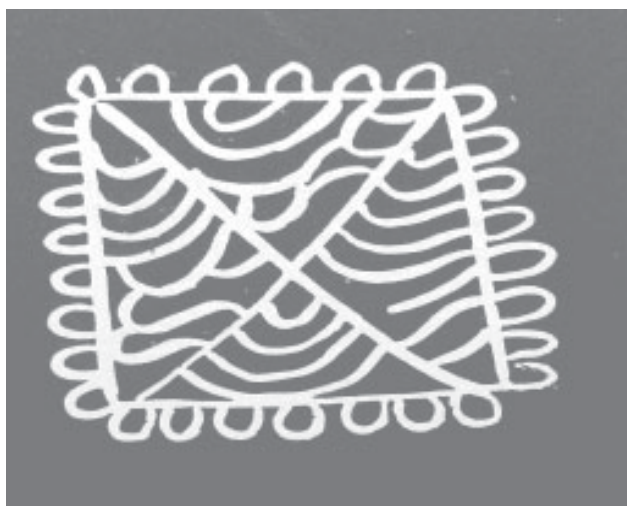
1. Introduction

How oral narratives transform into a tangible cultural artefact can be seen on the walls of the Saoras in Ganjam district of Odisha. These wall paintings are called *Ittalan*, meaning 'to write on the wall' where every community activity, from growing crops to curing illness, from pregnancy to birth, from encounters with and appeasement of spirits, from rites of the shamans to death are depicted, for all these have stories with numerous spirits and individuals as the major characters in the tales. The stories are not about the impersonal events, but significant experiences of their community realities, for they also narrate the tales of the community members including the ones about the fever of a girl child in one of the families or about the terrible hangover of a village youth after having too much of local brew the other night.

As the story goes, one Hargu once got drunk in Boramsingi. He then made for his home but he was followed and misled by Benasum, the spirit from Jospir hills. On his way back home Hargu lost his path and ended up roaming about around the same place turning his road into a never ending labyrinth. To appease the spirit that misled him they had to paint the labyrinth that Hargu was stuck in so that no such ordeal would ever occur to anybody anymore. This tale has been immortalised in an *ittalan*. That the story now lives on for generations with the overtly simplistic wall pattern showing a web like design, which is not a mere adornment on the mud wall of the cottage but an abiding part of the community history. The Saoras have kept alive their linkages with the events of the past with those oral tales re-depicted on the walls in the form of numerous *ittalans*. They include the stories

of their pantheon like Labosum the Earth God Jemra Kittung and Sidibiradi, the fertility gods, Uyungsum, the god of disease, also the sun god, Godalsum, the god of grass cutter Jammolsum, the fertility god, Tutiyumsum the God of mother's nipple as well as the community events like Osanadur, the harvest festival of the millet, Jammolpur, the ceremonial removal of seeds from store for sowing, Gadulpur, Harvest Festival of red gram etc.

These paintings on the walls are indicative of the rich legacies of the community narratives that essentially depict the social and cultural past of their co living, being kept alive through the terrains of their collective memories which find their tangible manifestations in the form of the *ittalans* having deeply intimate relationship between the oral legacies and their graphic representations, between their world of meanings and history.



Source: Hill Abode of Benasum, (Drawn when Hargu gets drunk and was followed by Benasum from Jospir Hill) Ittalan of the Saoras (Source: Verrier Elwin, 1955)

Eminent theorist on oral narratives, Walter J Ong, has divided oral narratives into three basic categories- primary, secondary and residual orality. Primary orality denotes the most fundamental dimension of the oral narratives which are pre-written or pre-lithic, uncontaminated by the written; they are the pure oral stories without any precedence in the domain of the written. The bush stories around the fire of the Old Man Mozz, the wise man of the Pygmy Bandar tribe, in the *Phantom* comics are one such popular example. Secondary orality is a derivative from the written such as the congregations telling the stories of the scriptures or the epics including the modern day

news broadcasting. Secondary orality involves the reverse dynamics, that is, from the written to the oral. Stories of several historical figures that dominate the oral narratives about the past and the history of the communities are part of the secondary orality which include the stories of several medieval heroes like Shivaji, Chilarai, Napoleon and so on. However, as they become part of the oral narrative the stories gain additional dimensions; they even at times in their oral versions get mythified.

The importance of secondary orality is also associated with numerous folk narratives including the folk theatres. *Kushaan Gaan* of the Rajbanshis is a folk theatre form which narrates the tale of Lub and Kush from the Ramayana and significantly the script of the *Kushaan Gaan* are invariably part of the oral depository which does not exist in the form of a written text. The community was largely exposed to the Ramayana through the 14th century Translation of the epic by Madhaba Kandali and the later cultivation of the epic by Sankardeva and his disciples. Significantly, there have been a number of folk theatre traditions in the Northeast linked with the Ramayana. *Sabin Alun* is the story orally transmitted among the Karbis of Assam that narrate the tale inspired by the Ramayana. The rich folk performance tradition in Manipur in a very significant way associated with oral versions of the Ramayana including *Wari Leeba*, *Pen-Sakpa*, *Khanjom Parvaas* well as *Jatra*. Here the written text generates orally embedded folk performances which gain an independent identity of its own, for in each of these folk renditions of the epic, the story gets deeply ingrained with the local ambience and ethos through copious narrative innovations. Secondary orality has been one of the most key referents to the social and cultural histories of the communities. That is, oral narratives evolving from the written.



Source: phantomwiki.org

Residual orality, on the other hand, is the influence of the oral on the written. There has been no dearth of the written texts including the two Indian epics that had formidably defined the courses of human civilisations and history which have essentially been the products of residual orality. Oral narratives have been the most crucial sources leading to the production of cultural texts for they have not only seminally determined the cultural life of human societies, orally driven texts have also been significantly influential in the realms of religious and spiritual life worlds of the communities. Mythologies, legends, various folk narratives, including rumours have been the most significant sources of myriad written texts that include epics, plays, fiction, social discourses and also, *inter alia*, history, including in the current context, one of the most influential online materials known as 'fake news'.

2. Oral narratives and history

However, history and orality seem to be apparently incongruous, primarily because when orality is largely seen as a narrative based on the slippery terrain of memory; history, on the other hand, is considered a more solemn discipline, a quasi-scientific discourse based on meticulous explorations of archives to develop what is called 'modern historiography', a discipline that had coincided with the rise of the 19th century European nation states. (Eileen Ka-May Cheng) But oral narratives and history cannot be entirely separated as two different categories altogether. While speaking about the inter linkages between history and oral narratives, Anirudh Deshpande has defined history as a dialectic of individual and collective memories. Shahid Amin had expanded the definition of history as the dynamics of memory and metaphor and in effect, his retelling of the ChauriChaura incident through the memory accounts has significantly altered the received narratives of the event that took place in 1922 which was canonised by the official texts of history as one of the most critical moments of Gandhi's encounter with the notion of political morality. Shahid Amin's methodology of reopening history has been inalienably associated with the oral narratives and the 'memory archives'. With this he has also opened up the debate on the critical relationship between history and the orality.

In the pre 19th century or the premodern time the historians were considered as intellectuals and of course not as scientists. In the pre and early modern Europe, as was posited by French sociologist Jean

Bodin, history was defined as *arshistorica* (that is history as an art). The major intellectuals and thinkers of the 16th, 17th and 18th century, who were known for their discourses in history, were Jean Bodin, Francis Bacon, Voltaire, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon *et al* and none of them were trained historians.

The '80s had seen the emergence of the idea of Oral History, pioneered by the eminent oral history theorist and British sociologist, Paul Thompson. He had expanded and liberated the scope of history by incorporating the seemingly mundane, humdrum experiences of life of ordinary subjects as the sources as well as the core history. Thompson had extended relative privilege to the lives rather than to the events, to the social rather than to the mere political. Oral history is a method that has sharply deviated from the desperate 19th century preoccupation of history to identify itself with the methods that are overtly adored as 'scientific'. As Hughes Warrington and other theorists of history have pointed out, the modern historiography based on archives coincided with the 19th century nation states of Europe as well as the developments of modern class rooms and the proliferation of academic events like seminars etc. (Hughes Warrington 2015, Cheng, 2012qtd. in Deshpande).

Thompson had underlined that despite the 'pretensions of specialists', interviews used to be the major sources in the 18th, 19th and 20th century historiographies. Instead of archives and records, eyewitnesses, oral accounts and public narratives used to be quite important tools of history in Asia such as China, Japan and even in Europe. It was only in the 19th century that history became increasingly a domain of the modern historians who work, as pointed out by Thompson, at an 'imagined distance from society.' Significantly, Thompson has also pointed out that it was Germany which was the cradle of positivist history.¹

The non positivist history of the past turned the micro stories into meta stories; the small stories became the 'master stories' subsequently to become part of the 'primary sources' of modern historiography. Traveller's accounts, personal memoirs, pilgrim's narratives, recalling and remembrances about places and people etc. became part of the 'specious accounts' (the plausible versions) largely formed by the orally transmitted narratives.

3. Metahistory: cultural turn of history

Hayden White has tried to address the questions as to what does it mean to think historically and what

are the characteristics of historical enquiry. He has pointed out that history was considered as a specific mode of thought and historical knowledge was seen as an autonomous domain in the spectrum of the human physical sciences (1975, 1).

White brought history much closer to literature and vice versa when he had developed the notion of 'metahistory'. He had conceptualised history in terms of five fundamental elements- chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of arguments and mode of ideological implications. Chronicle and story are the primary elements representing the process of selecting and arranging the unprocessed historical accounts for their comprehensive presentation to the audience mediating through four way interfaces involving historical fields, unprocessed historical records, other historical accounts and an audience.

The historical elements are organised into chronicles by arranging events in their temporal order then they are transformed into stories by rearranging the components into parts of a 'spectacle' having a beginning, middle and an end. This transformation of chronicle into story is effected through a set of motifs such as inaugural motifs, transitional motifs and terminating motifs. The basic record of an event, its time and place, is transformed into an inaugurating event, transitional motif signals the reader to hold his expectations in abeyance till the terminating motif or the closing motif is introduced which indicates the resolution or an end to a crisis.

Then how to differentiate history from chronicles? Chronicles are open ended, they do not necessarily have a structure with a beginning, middle and an ending, when history is a narration of a sequence of events from inauguration to termination therefore the task of the historian is to explain the past by way of 'identifying', 'uncovering', 'finding' the stories 'that lie buried in the chronicles'. And the difference between 'history' and 'fiction', explains Hayden White, is that when a historian 'finds' the story, a fiction writer 'invents' his story. Chronicles in a very substantial way begins with orature for every historical detail is not necessarily a written record in the beginning rather it is a tale among the folks.

Hayden White has emphasised on the interplay between historical and literary discourses when he picked up the archetypal story forms from Northrop Frye involving four types of emplotment- Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire. And a historian by default chooses any one of these archetypal forms as the essential narrative texture. White has identified the

quintessential tropes used as narrative devices- metonymy, synecdoche, irony and metaphor as the primary tools of narration both in literature and history. Notably, the oral narratives too reflect similar association with these forms and tropes.²

Anannya Hiloidari, while speaking about the retrieval of the lost figures and spaces of history, refers to BishnuPriya Ghosh's work *When Born Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in Contemporary Indian Novel* and argues that there is a new emergence to focus on retrieving tales from the realm of oblivion in order to allot space to the neglected and forgotten protagonists of the provincial peripheries. This exercise of retrieval can proceed not from history texts for they do not figure in such narratives, but rather from the informal domain of oral narratives and community lore. This project has been defined by Ghosh as 'obsession with ghosts' taking a cue from Derrida's term 'hauntology' (which he used in his lecture on the imperatives of re-reading Marx in his lecture titled, "Spectre of Marx"). One such literary creation has been cited is RuchirJoshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* that looks at the lore about the death and mythic resurrection of Subhash Chandra Bose as one of its important sources.³ⁱⁱⁱ One of the most significant orature based novels of recent times from this region is Rita Choudury's *Makam (China Town Days)*. This is a novel that retrieves the lost history of the Chinese Indians who were very much a part of the Assam's ethnic landscape since they were brought to Assam by the British tea planters as garden workers but the world of their assurance and comfort crumbled as the Sino Tibetan war broke out in 1962. From being integral to the social milieu, soon they became enemies of the land, they were expelled to their mother land, China, which, with the Communist regime in force, ironically, became a strange land for them. The novel retrieves the lost and the forgotten world of the Chinese Assamese from extant lore and tragic folk accounts where the stories of the Chinese Assamese remained alive. Two other significant novels from the region are Rita Choudhury's another equally significant historical novel, *Deolangkhui* and Chandana Goswami's Akademi award winning novel, *PatkairIporey Mur Desh* where both political and social history intermingle to narrate abiding human tales largely taking myths and elements which are alive in the oratures of the land. Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* and EsterineKire's *When the River Sleeps* are two of the most significant fictional narratives among several other literary works from the Northeast that have taken

oral myths as their primary inspirations. Kaushik Barua's *Windhorse* is a significant novel from the region that has recreated the tale of Tibet largely through the oral accounts that the author had gathered during his visits to Dharmashala.

4. The Buranjis of Assam

Among the native ancient Kingdoms of India, Assam is one of the very few territories having a well-established tradition of writing history under the Ahom kings known as the *Buranjis* since the 13th century and the *Vanshavalis* written under the Koch Kings. The ancient histories of Assam are largely in the form of chronicles, with the inaugural motif of *metahistory* being more prominent. The Ahom *buranjis* were written on the palm leaves by individual chroniclers. (But with the fall of the Ahoms, post Yandaboo Treaty, and the arrival of the colonial rule, the tradition gradually declined and most of the manuscripts got stuck as private collections scattered among several house holds, many of which are yet to be found and retrieved) However, after the arrival of the Missionaries in the wake of the colonial rule, the American Baptist Mission took a remarkable initiative in collecting those manuscripts and getting them published from the mid 19th century. Many of the sporadic *Buranjis* were collected between 1840-1850 by Rev. Nathan Brown of Sibsagar Mission. These were later published in serial form in the first Assamese newspaper the *Orunodoi* in 1853. The early manuscripts of the Ahom *Buranjis* were compiled and edited by Rev. Nidhi Levi Farewell, the first Assamese convert to Christianity. These *Buranjis* were later edited and compiled in book form from 1930 onwards by the *Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti* under the guidance of Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the most versatile native historian from Assam.

There were several versions of the *Buranjis* called *Tungkhungia Buranji* (by Srinath Duara Barbarua), *Deodhai Buranji* (recovered from Anandiram Gogoi which represents the orthodox Ahom expressions and thoughts) *Bahghoria Burha Gonhair Buranji* (1662-1679), *Datiyolia Buranji* (the history of minor chief doms), *Padshah Buranji* (the chronicle on the Delhi Sultanate), *Asom Buranji* by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (1835), *Tripura Buranji* by Ratna Kandali and Arjun Das Katakya in 1724 (who had gone to Tripura as the Royal Emissaries of King Rudra Singha- 1696-1714 and wrote the chronicle) including the *Buranjis* about Manipur Kingdom, Jayantia Kingdom, Kachari Kingdom, Koch Kingdom Chutiya Kingdom, Mikir

Kingdom, and the like. The history of Assam as well as several ancient kingdoms of the North East has been primarily drawn from these *Buranjis* by the colonial historiographers whose claims of authenticity were mainly based on these sources. But for the *Buranjis*, apart from various texts like the *Yogini Tantra*, *Kalika Purana* etc., the oral narratives have been the most abiding sources.

One distinctive feature of the *Buranjis* is that most of these *Buranjis* were originally written in Tai Ahom Language which were translated into Assamese retaining the original impersonal tune of the narratives. The narration is not linear like that of a metahistoric narrative with neat division of beginning, middle and end but rather presented in episodic form. In fact, apart from being the history texts, the *Buranjis* are also one of the first cultural texts in a native language in the medieval and the precolonial era. The Assamese *Buranjis* had turned the whole enterprise of writing history into a veritable 'Public History' project which turned writing history almost a community occupation with several authors writing and translating *Buranjis* with their own initiatives. These *Buranjis*, despite having done mostly under the Royal patronage, were also carried out with individual initiatives resulting in the spreading out of the texts across a wide territory which made it equally challenging to collect and compile them in systematic volumes. Sarunath Barua of Chamata in Kamrup, Sukumar Mahanta of North Guwahati, Anadiram Gogoi of Sibsagar and many other who preserved these *Buranjis* in their private collections from whom the several *Buranjis* were later collected during the colonial period.

History and oral narratives are not always complimentary to each other. As in the project of Shahid Amin, orality and history might as well have uneasy coexistence with written history wielding its inherent power to subdue the informal narratives of oral accounts. One such example is involved with the Naxalbari movement (1967-1974). When the Naxalbari is one of the most celebrated revolutionary discourses for a section for the natives, whose community members were mercilessly murdered during the Naxalbari mayhem, have entirely a different narrative in their oral accounts. In one of my recent interviews with Mr. Pramod Barman, who was a government witness to the Naxalbari incidents, had presented a reverse narrative on the event. For him Naxalbari was basically a ploy to dispossess the native Rajbanshi owners from their ancestral lands primarily initiated by the high caste Hindu mainstream leaders from the

metropolis of Calcutta. They had provided a devastating legitimacy to the killing of the Rajbanshis by branding them as the 'feudal repressors'. Ironically, all the land occupied by the Naxalites were neatly taken over again by the High Caste Hindu mainstream communities who came there as refugees from East Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was, according to him, one of the first acts of ethnic cleansing under the garb of 'revolution'. When Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar are glorified as the great protagonists of a 'revolution', the native Rajbanshis of Naxalbari consider them as the two most pernicious masterminds of mass murders of indigenous farmers by having constructed them as 'class enemies'.

Orality is one of the dynamic sources creative literature of writing history and. Not only for the canonical histories but also to produce alternative modes history as well as literary narratives. History can no longer afford to insulate itself at an imagined isolation from the raw terrains of community memories that lie beyond the rarefied arena of 'scientific' history. In order to retrieve its power as a social discourse, history needs to reinvent itself as a commensurate discipline with the apparently elusive terrains of memory, community

lore as well as orature. Oral History is essentially a project to retrieve the silences.

With the easy access of a tape recorder and basic camera, oral history became a 'tool of anti-establishment of history'. It is important to note that oral history of the communities and neighbourhood have become important aspects of study in many countries when it is yet to gain interest in Indian historiography. As Deshpande writes, India is yet to come up with a comprehensive Reader of Oral History in India, there has not been any institutional support for a dedicated oral history project yet. Oral history is an interface between a competent historical enquirer and a common subject who does not have any obligation to reflect any form of sophistication in terms of social situation or academic skills; an oral historian converses with the 'people without history' to retrieve their obliterated pasts. Oral history is a dialogue keenly carried out through speaking and silences.

Referring to the colonial historians that took empirical ventures to the multitudes of peoples and locales undertaking massive travels to distant places, Marc Bloch would define an oral historians with notebooks and a 'sturdy (pair) of shoes'.

End notes

¹Thompson writes: Nor is it accidental that the cradle of this academic professionalism should have been nineteenth-century Germany, where university professors constituted a narrow patrician middle-class group, particularly sharply cut off through their isolation in small provincial towns, political impotence, and the acute hierarchical status-consciousness of Germany, from the realities of political and social life. (Thompson, 1988, 57-58 in Deshpande)

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was one of the pioneers of Positivist History that emphasised on the historical methodology based on positivist philosophy which gave primacy to logically empirical data and verifiable truth as the foundation of enquiry rather than metaphysical speculations or *priori*.

ⁱⁱHayden White defines Romance as the drama of self-identification symbolised by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it and his subsequent liberation from this. It is a drama about triumph of good over evil, virtue over vice, light over darkness and his transcendence from the world where he was imprisoned by the Fall. Contrary to Romantic redemption, Satire is the drama of diremption which is dominated by the ultimate apprehension that man is the captive of the world and not a master of it, that the consciousness and will of man is perennially inadequate to overcome the dark forces of death and the unremitting enemy of human beings. Comedy and Tragedy, defines White, suggest the possibilities of partial liberation from the condition of Fall. Comedy suggests hopes for at least temporary triumphs at the prospect of occasional reconciliation of the forces which is celebrated in festive occasion depicting the dramatic termination of change and transformation. There is no such festive occasion in a Tragedy apart from the ones that is false and illusory, it intimates about the states of terrible divisions among men. But the huge Fall and the astounding destabilisation of the world in the end of a Tragedy is not as much devastating for the survivors of the agony and the spectators alike for it enables the consciousness to gain the understanding of the epiphany of the law that governs the essence of human existence represented by the fatal exertion of the protagonist in his encounter with the world.

ⁱⁱⁱAmit Choudhury's *A Strange and a Sublime Address* deals with a similar theme with the character of Subhash Bose as a metaphor for the project of retrieval.

^{iv} The events are not only about the political history but also the cultural history of the time. There are detailed accounts on the cultural and social rites and customs including the process of finding groom and brides for the royal scions, arranging their weddings and mode of performing the rituals, accounts of death rites, rituals associated with birth, several forms of pujas to various deities etc.

References

Interview

Unpublished interview with Pramod Barman on 14 October, 2019 at Gauripur, Assam.

Published Works

Amin, Shahid. *Event, Metaphor, Memory: ChauriChaura 1922-1992*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2006

Bhuyan, Surya Kumar (Ed). *Deodhai Asom Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, 1932/ 2001.

—. *Tripura Buranji (by Ratna Kandali and Arjundas Katakya)*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, February 1938/ February 1990.

Bhuyan, Surya Kumar. *Jayantia Buranji*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, 1937/ 2012.

Cheng, Eileen Ka-May. *Historiography: An Introductory Guide*, London: Continuum, 2012.

Choudhury, Pratap Chandra (Ed). *Asom Buranji Sara by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, Assisted by Radhanath Barbarua and Others*. Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, 1844/ March 1991.

Choudhury, Rita. *Deolangkhui*. Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan.

Coudhury, Rita. *Makam*. Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan, 2010.

Deshpande, Anirudh. "Past, Present and Oral History." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 29, 22 Jul, 2017.

Elwin, Verrier. "The Religion of an Indian Tribe: The Art of the Ikon" (1955) in *Verrier Elwin: Philanthropologist: Selected Writings*. Ed. NariRushtomji. Shillong: NEHU Publications (in association with OUP), 1989.

Ghosh, Bishnu Priya. *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Goswami, Chandana. *Patkair Ipare Mur Desh*. Guwahati.

Hiloidari, Ananya. "Itihasx Adhyanat Byatikrami Chinta: Anusthanik itihax-Bhashyat Anchalik Sottar Sthan." *Gariyoshi*, September 2019: 28-30.

Singh, Prakash. *The Naxalite Movement in India*. New Delhi: Rupa, 1995/ 2016.

Hughes-Warrington, Marnie. *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, 3rd ed, London: Routledge, 2015.

White, Hayden. *Methistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1973/1975.

